

Meteorology
By Linda D. Brewer

It hadn't been that great a party, but Kenny had done what he could with it. Now all he had to do was figure out where he was and get himself home. He was lying on his back, still in his scrubs and jacket. There was some kind of tarp on top of him which had no insulating properties whatsoever. He could see the nighttime sky, a quarter moon backed up by a million stars.

He remembered telling someone he was thinking of applying to medical school and that person—his supervisor's wife?—saying she thought he already had, that he had told her about it at a previous lab party. "I don't think it was last year. Maybe the year before?"

Jereen something, with electric Christmas earrings twinkling in her ears, one of the sales reps. Not his supervisor's wife, thank God.

He groaned and threw the thing off him. It wasn't a tarp, it was Santa Claus, deflated. He'd spent what seemed like hours tugging it around himself for warmth, and now when the pain of his bladder forced him to his feet he saw the red tummy and white beard and realized where he was—on the roof of his girlfriend's house across from Tumamoc Hill. It wasn't the middle of nowhere but it was the last house before the open desert around the community college, gateway to the middle of nowhere.

He remembered leaving the lab party around six-thirty for another party, which he decided not to attend due to the police car parked on the side of the road at Silverbell and Grant. He'd made a discreet U-turn and found himself on good old Placida and decided on the spur of the moment to visit his baby boy.

Santa lay flat in the gravel in front of the house when he drove up. Dylanne's Uncle Frank was bent over it stomping on a plastic foot pump connected to a hose stuck in Santa's middle. Frank had given him a sour look. "He knows if you've been bad or good, Kenny," Frank had said. "If you want to go inside, you need to earn it."

He'd said to Frank, "I'll take Santa up on the roof and blow him up for you."

Frank had tossed him the hose. "I'm going in. I hurt my back hauling out the damn reindeer." Three white wire-ribbed reindeer lay strewn around the gravel in front of the house like Christmas roadkill.

If he didn't get off the roof and into his truck he would freeze to death, and the ravens would take his eyes for sugarplums, ho, ho, ho. He lay back on the plastic to rest just for a minute. He had the thought that freezing to death might not be so bad if it kept him from memories of stupidity and shame, when he saw something bright out of the corner of his eye, a white streak that came and went before he could identify it. Then he thought he saw another streak high up, fainter. Comets, he thought, but no, it must be meteors, the Geminid shower. He remembered the module they'd had in school, and how he'd gone outside one night and stared at the sky until his neck ached, and never seen a thing.

His eyes closed. When he opened them again, a meteorite was streaking straight toward him, with a sound behind it like a sonic boom. He jumped to his feet and watched its trajectory as it fell into

the desert on the other side of the community college. He felt the thump of its landing in his chest. All at once he knew he had to find it.

He'd spent a good part of three years running the cross-country trails around Pima CC, up and down the rocky folds between Greasewood and La Cholla. He knew that territory better than he knew his current apartment complex. If the meteorite was there, he would find it, and he could go forward from there. No more remembering, just an amazing future ahead of him.

He slid down the ladder and stumbled over a reindeer that was climbing up. Another reindeer stood on its hind legs peeping in the front window. The third lay on its back between Frank's pickup and the garage door, its legs straight up in the air. He remembered setting it there and knowing Dylanne would laugh when she saw it. Frank had mowed down the neighbor's dachshund a couple of years earlier. Dylanne was pretty, but when she laughed she was a knock-out. She might even laugh if he told her how he'd watered her aunt's basil plants pissing off the roof, but that was a tricky one. Her aunt was a good cook, handy with herbs and spices.

He hadn't checked his watch when the meteorite landed but he had the sense that time was getting away from him. He climbed into his truck and started the engine, with the heater turned up high. He began to shiver, worse than he'd done up on the roof. He wondered why that happened, that warming up made you shiver. He remembered as a kid playing hunt the thimble with his mother, how she would say, "You're getting warmer." He wished he had some coffee.

He turned from La Cholla onto Anklam, westbound toward the community college. Off in the distance he heard a siren and wondered if it might be related to the meteorite. Maybe professionals were already heading out to try to recover it, scientists armed with a police escort. Then he remembered that there were always sirens around here at night. Dylanne called it the neighborhood theme song. Around and above the siren he heard a pack of coyotes singing the excitement he felt.

The college consisted of a group of gray cement blocks surrounded by acres of scrubby desert. He drove around with his window down, but he didn't see anything unusual in the parking lots. There were lights on at the track and he saw one person jogging around it in the outside lane. He checked his watch. It was just after midnight, the middle of December. Still, when he was a student at Pima he'd gone running at all hours, as his head and his body required. Not that this guy was running—he was doing eleven-minute miles at best. There was a short school bus parked at the edge of the wash behind the track. Kenny parked next to it and put on his gloves and zipped his jacket up to his chin. He grabbed his flashlight out of the glove compartment and hurried up to the track. He stepped through the break in the cyclone fence, and began to jog after the guy. He scanned the football field for meteoric signs—scorch marks, chunks of molten rock, a gigantic divot—whatever kind of chaos a rock would be entitled to cause after falling millions of miles—but saw nothing.

He caught up with the jogger at the south end of the track where the cyclone fence opened onto the cross-country trails. The guy was slow because he was pushing a middle-aged gut ahead of him. He stopped by the fence and rested his hands on his thighs, catching his breath. He looked up at Kenny and said, "Doctor DeAvila. You made it."

Kenny started to say, “Do I know you?” and then he realized he did know the guy. It was his old Pima buddy, Andres Anguiano, thirty pounds heavier and not looking good with it. He said, “Andres. Good to see you.”

Andres said, “Did you see where it landed?”

“See what?” Kenny said.

“The meteorite. Didn’t you hear it?”

“Is that what that was? I heard a boom. I thought it was a jet out of Davis Monthan.”

Andres said, “It’s the real thing. A celestial phenomenon. I want to find it.”

Kenny swung his arm toward the cross-country trails. “It’ll take a lot of looking.”

“I’ll give it a hundred and ten per cent. But hold on a minute. I was just getting warmed up. Now I’m cold again.” Andres pulled a pair of leather gloves out of his pocket and put them on. Kenny hadn’t seen him in six or seven years. He’d heard Andres was driving a school bus, a manhood-destroying occupation for sure. He shone his flashlight on the first section of trail and began to jog down the hill, picking his feet up to avoid catching his toe on a rock. Andres fell in behind him, like in the old days except that he made more noise.

“At least it’s too cold for snakes,” Andres said. A few seconds later he said, “There’s another meteorite. Too far away, though. Let somebody else find it.”

“Probably didn’t even land. Probably burned up in space,” Kenny said. He shone his light in a half circle as he ran, turning the beam from one side of the trail to the other. Everything—rocks, greasewood, fragments of cactus ribs—looked as if it was holding still until they passed.

“Over there,” Andres said. Kenny pointed his flashlight off to the side where Andres was already stumbling through the weeds. Something winked bright under a prickly pear. Andres held up a mini whiskey bottle. He put it in his coat pocket and trotted back. “I wish I had a bag. I could collect trash, as long as I’m out here.”

“That’s not what we’re here for,” Kenny said, and then realized he’d said “we” and wished he hadn’t.

They jogged downhill into the sandy wash and up the other side, slowing to a walk as the uphill grew steeper. Still, Kenny kept ahead. If it came down to a sprint, he wanted to grab the rock and be out of there before Andres knew what was up.

“Have you ever seen a meteorite?” Andres asked.

“On TV.” He remembered the program. It was the night Kenton was born, and he was in the labor room with Dylanne and they were watching a woman astronomer weigh and measure a meteorite. It was iron, a smooth dark lump found in a farmer’s field. Then things got tricky with the baby and they made him leave the room for a few minutes, and when he came back it was all about life taking place right in front of him, not on television.

Andres said, “The kids study about stars in special ed. They take their projects home on the bus—pictures of the sun and whatnot. I’m always finding stuff they leave behind.” He panted as he talked. “They’re all challenged in some way, but they try, you’ve got to hand it to them.” After a minute he said, “I know the work you do is more important than what I do. What kind of doctor are you? Do you do operations?”

“I saw a leg amputation today,” Kenny said.

“That must make you queasy, right? Or do you get used to it?”

Kenny didn’t reply. The leg had made him queasy, but Andres’s questions were worse. He scrambled up the last few feet to the top of the ridge and started east along the trail. It was flatter up here and the going was easier. The trail cut a figure-eight five miles around, with a few side trails that had probably started out as animal trails. Ten years ago he’d run figure eights for fun, mapping his future in his head. Two years at community college, then transfer to the U of A, pre-med, then medical school, and in a few years he would end up a highly successful, highly respected doctor with an adoring girlfriend. He’d told Andres all about it. Andres, the simpleton, had believed him.

He caught his toe and stumbled. A sensation like electricity ran up his spine and made him break into a sweat. He swore and picked up the pace.

“Wait up. Are you upset with me for some reason?” Andres asked. Kenny could imagine the kind of whiny, long-winded arguments Andres must have with his wife.

“Why should I be? I haven’t seen you in years. I haven’t even talked to you.”

“Yes, you have. You called me.”

“When?”

“Tonight. You called me twice. You said you wanted to get back in shape. You said to meet you at the track at midnight. Then you called back about five minutes later and told me all over again.”

“I don’t remember. I’ve been under the weather lately,” Kenny said.

“You sounded impaired, Doc. I could hear it in your voice.”

Andres’s nonjudgmental tone made him feel judged. “I was at a party. Everything was free.”

“Free is nice.” They trotted, both of them out of breath. “It’s a good idea, though, getting back in shape,” Andres said.

Kenny wondered what would have happened if he hadn’t seen the meteorite and come after it, if he’d frozen to death on the roof. Would Andres still be trotting around the track, waiting for him? Or would he have ventured onto the trail and found the thing on his own?

“So how long do you plan to look for it?”

“Until I find it,” Andres said. “Sorry buddy, but finders, keepers.”

“No problem.” Kenny kept going, following the bright circle of his flashlight, trying to remember if he really had called Andres, until all of a sudden he realized he’d forgotten to sweep the light around.

The flashlight had captured his vision and made him forget about the bigger picture. He shut it off and stood still until his eyes adjusted to the darkness.

“What’s up?” Andres asked.

Kenny pointed. “Stars.”

“Right,” Andres said. “Don’t get mad, Doc, but are you still high?”

Kenny shook his head. Andres had always liked to bring him down. It was envy, Dylanne used to say. He didn’t think she’d say it now. He started running again and found he could get along without his flashlight. In the war between the moon and the stars, the moon was winning. It reminded him of Dylanne, how she’d looked before his son was born, sway back and bulging front, pale, serene face. She hadn’t wanted to get married while she was pregnant. She wanted to wear a nice dress and look good in it. Now she could, and she wouldn’t, because he wasn’t turning out to be the kind of man she wanted for a husband.

Andres stumbled and fell behind him. Kenny turned the flashlight back on and waited for him to pick himself up. “I heard you got married.”

Andres said. He examined his palms, one of which was scraped raw. He wiped the blood on his pants. “Yeah. My wife’s name is Annette.”

“Any kids?”

“We keep thinking about it. Annette’s mom would babysit. The thing is I can handle other peoples’ handicapped kids on the bus. I don’t think I could deal with it if my own kid turned out like that.”

“Kids happen. Grownups deal with it. That’s what I’ve heard.”

Andres stopped. “Thanks for the tip, Doc.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You tell all your patients stuff like that? Cause that’s deep.”

Kenny felt his temper flare and knew Andres was feeling the same way. It wasn’t how he wanted the night to go. “Let’s not talk. Let’s just look.”

His feet still knew the way. They walked and jogged in silence another mile. Kenny shone his flashlight back and forth. There were rocks everywhere, but they all looked as if they’d sat there for years, sunrise, sunset, and all the hours in between, in their own silent congregation. If there was a stranger among them, would they kick it out or invite it into their midst? The thought made him wonder if he really still could be high.

“I saw the meteorite, too,” he said. “For a second I thought it might land on me.”

“What a way to go,” Andres said from ten yards behind him.

Every once in a while now they came across a candy wrapper in the trail. Andres picked them up and put them in his pocket with no comment from either of them. They reached the middle of the figure

eight and Kenny's flashlight illuminated the usual rocks, dried weeds, a greasewood bush, and a man seated in a patch of sand eating a candy bar. He held his hand up in front of his face when the beam of light hit him. Andres said behind him, "Careful, Ken."

The man was wearing a dirty parka and jeans and there was a beat-up backpack on the ground, open at the top with packages of candy and cookies spilling out of it. He was in his sixties, judging by his weathered face, but he could have been younger.

"Awesome. Where'd you get all the treats?" Andres asked, as if he were talking to one of his school bus kids.

The man spat out whatever he had been chewing. "Santa Claus," he said. "Leave me the hell alone."

"We're just looking for a rock," Andres said.

The man grunted. "There's rocks everywhere. Take one and go."

"A special rock. A meteorite that fell out of the sky," Andres said. "We were hoping to find it."

"I could have been an astrologer," the man said. He began to pull more treats out of his pack—pretzels, candy bars, a bag of sunflower seeds, a package of jerky, half a dozen pre-wrapped giant cookies.

"Astronomer," Kenny said. "Astronomer, not astrologer."

"I could have been any damn thing I wanted to be if I just put my mind to it. That's what they used to tell me." He unwrapped a cookie and took a bite. "I just didn't have the fire in the belly," he said, chewing. "Now my belly hurts all the time unless I eat. I think I have an ulcer."

"You're in luck," Andres said. "This man right here is a doctor."

"Not now," Kenny said.

A siren screamed on Greasewood. It drew closer until Kenny figured it had stopped on the edge of the road, maybe a quarter of a mile from where they were.

The man dropped the cookie and put his hand in his pocket. "You called the cops on me."

"No, I didn't," Andres said.

"Not you. Him. The smart-ass doctor." He pulled a gun out of his pocket and pointed it at Kenny. "Turn that light off."

Kenny fumbled with the switch, got the light off, and put his hands up. In the sudden darkness Andres said, "Sir, you know that's not a responsible way to use a gun. I'm going to have to confiscate it."

"No," Kenny whispered, but Andres walked over to the man and held out his hand. "Give it to me, and gather up your snacks and get out of here."

"You called the cops on me," the man said. "Now you're trying to steal my food."

“The patrol car probably just nailed a speeder. He’ll leave in a couple of minutes. I don’t eat that kind of food, and I wouldn’t steal it from you if I did. Stealing is wrong. So give me the gun.”

Kenny waited for the shot, but none came. The man began to stuff his treats back into his pack. He got up with a grunt and shuffled off into the darkness.

Andres picked up the flashlight and turned it on. “We’re okay,” he said.

A rock sailed out of the darkness and hit the dirt in front of them. The man yelled, “Eat that, you interfering bastards.”

They waited another minute. Andres said, “He’s gone. Probably robbed the gas station.”

Kenny felt the last of the evening’s chemicals burn through him. His legs began to shake. “Andres, you saved my life.”

“No problem. It’s nothing compared to what you do. You amputated a guy’s leg today. That probably saved his life, right?”

Kenny shone his light around on the place where’d he almost died. Andres had saved him, and he owed him the truth. “Andres, I’m not a doctor,” he said. “I’m a lab tech. I never made it to medical school. I never got in. I tried, twice, and then I gave up.”

Andres said, “Wow. Is that right?”

“It’s not right. It’s correct.”

“You help people get better, though, with the kind of work you do?”

“The pathologist makes the diagnosis. I do the dirty work, slicing and dicing, mixing chemicals for stains. It’s a job.”

“I never knew that,” Andres said. “I always thought you made good. I kept thinking I’d go to the hospital someday and there you’d be, slapping those paddles on my chest, saving my life instead of me saving yours.” He sounded triumphant.

Kenny said, “Go ahead and mock me. I guess I deserve it. One more true thing. I woke up on the roof of my girlfriend’s house tonight. That’s where I saw the meteorite.”

“You sleep on the roof a lot?”

“We had a party at the lab. I had a couple of margaritas, plus some weed in the parking lot after. It wasn’t much of a party. I did what I could to make it fun.”

Andres said, “You never could hold your liquor.” He cleared his throat. “Okay. As long as you’re being honest, I’ve got something to confess to you.”

Kenny braced himself for a story of marital sins. He didn’t want to hear the gory details.

“The gun isn’t real.” Andres took it out of his pocket and passed it to Kenny. It was plastic, no heavier than a flyswatter. When he pulled the trigger it made a tinny machine-gun noise.

"I had to take one away from a kid on the bus a couple of weeks ago. I recognized it the minute the guy pointed it at us. So slap my wrist, but do it fast 'cause I'm freezing my ass out here."

"Let's just shut up and look for the meteorite."

"You want to keep looking?"

"At least we're getting some exercise. Coach would be proud."

Andres said, "I'm tired. You're still in better shape than I am. Here's something else I'll give you. You were always a better runner than me. You trotted along like a coyote and I always ran like a dog, even when I was in shape."

Kenny began to run again, taking a shortcut he remembered that led back to the track. Behind him Andres said, "One more confession. I drove the school bus here, which I'm not supposed to do. Please don't rat on me."

Kenny said, "I stole a roll of toilet paper from the bathroom in the lab. I always run out, at home. I've stolen three or four rolls this past year. I keep saying I'm going to buy some and pay them back, but I haven't."

"You're a real shit. Literally."

"Yeah."

"I'm worse. I actually wanted to take some of that guy's cookies," Andres said. "I eat that kind of stuff all the time."

"You steal candy from the kids on the bus?" Kenny asked.

"Yeah. I'm addicted to round food. You ever want to eat something just because you like the shape of it?"

"My girlfriend."

They labored up the last uphill and there was the opening in the fence. "Hey, we're here," Andres said.

"You want to turn around and keep looking?" Kenny said.

Andres shook his head. "I'm okay with quitting if you are."

They walked around the track until they reached the opening at the south end. Andres said, "I'm sure tired of stumbling around in the dark. That's what you have to do if you have a kid, get up in the night."

Kenny said, "Actually, I have a son. He's almost a year old."

"No kidding?"

"I wouldn't kid about a thing like that. His name's Kenton, like my name only fancier."

"He live with his mom?"

“Yeah. They live with her aunt and uncle.”

“You see him very often?”

Kenny shrugged. “Not as often as I’d like. It’s hard to make arrangements.” His son changed so much in between the times he saw him, he sometimes worried that he could pass him in the park in his stroller and not know it was him. “I saw him tonight, just for a minute. His mother wasn’t happy with me for showing up in the state I was in. She accused me of being dissipated in front of the baby.”

“You could apologize.”

“I think I did. I don’t think she accepted it.”

“You could do something to make it up to her. Some kind of good deed. Just a suggestion. That’s what I do when I make Annette mad. I wash her car, stuff like that.”

They walked across the parking lot to where the bus and Kenny’s truck were parked, noses to the edge of the wash.

“I’m going to sleep until noon,” Andres said. “I guess the lesson here is that we don’t need a space rock to make our lives better, right? It’s up to us to do that.” He held out his hand, and then said, “What the hell. This is where we’re supposed to hug.” They embraced for a couple of seconds.

Andres said, “I hate to say this, but I wasn’t surprised about what you told me. I had my doubts, way back when, when you kept bragging about wanting to be a doctor. You’re smart in your own way, but it takes book smarts, know what I mean? Plus it takes connections.”

“I guess you’re right,” Kenny said.

“We’ll have to do this again in the daylight,” Andres said.

“Sure thing,” Kenny said. “Next time we run all the way around the figure eight.”

He watched Andres climb into the bus and turn on the lights. He waved as Andres maneuvered it out of the parking lot and drove off. His heart was thumping again, but he made himself wait until he saw the bus turn onto Greasewood and then he sidestepped down into the wash and shone his flashlight along the bottom. There it was, the thing he’d seen in the headlights from the school bus. A dark, solid-looking rock, different from the others. He picked it up and felt a thrill at its weight in his hand. It felt significant, full of potential, a little scary. He looked up at the sky. There was no way he could throw it back where it came from. He might as well keep it.

Tonight when Dylanne let him into the house, “just for a second, I mean it,” Kenton was in his high chair having a bedtime snack of dry cereal. He picked up the round little pieces with precision between his tiny thumb and forefinger. He made a sound, “Mmm-mmm,” and Kenny wondered if he had come up with it on his own or if someone had taught him. When he saw Kenny he stopped eating and looked at him, his mouth slightly open, his two little white teeth glistening in the light. The look in his dark eyes said, “You’re my father? What’s in it for me?” Kenny couldn’t help be proud of him for that look, and scared because of the obligation it laid on him.

All the way back to his apartment he was was tempted to stop and examine the rock under a streetlight, but he pushed that idea away. Don’t stop, he told himself. Keep going. It’s real. It fell right on

top of me. That was what he would tell Kenton when he was a little older, when it was time to pass it on to him. Keep it. It's the real deal and it'll bring you good luck all your life. "One thing," he would say. "A word of advice. Keep it. Believe in it. Just don't look at it too hard."